

Continuity and rupture in the Italian literary field 1926-1960

Book

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Introduction

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This special issue of *Italian Studies*, entitled *Continuity and Rupture in the Italian Literary Field 1926-1960*, is the third of a series of guest-edited volumes addressing the role played by periodicals in Italian twentieth-century literary culture. Like its predecessors, this volume too is the result of the research carried out as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project *Mapping Literary Space: Literary Journals, Publishing Firms, Intellectuals in Italy 1940-1960* (2012-2015).¹ Similarly, this issue continues the discussion on how periodicals

¹ *Mediating Culture in the Italian Literary Field 1940s-1950s*, ed. by Francesca Billiani, Daniela La Penna, Mila Milani, *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 21.1 (2016); *National Dialogues and Transnational Exchanges Across Italian Periodical Culture 1940-1960*, ed. by Francesca Billiani, Daniela La Penna, Mila Milani, *Modern Italy*, 21.2 (2016).

react and adapt to political and institutional pressures, by selecting and orienting aesthetic, political, and cultural interventions into topical debates of the day. It does so by contributing rigorous archive-based explorations of key journals, which shaped the Italian literary discourse in the years under scrutiny. Thus the volume intends to re-evaluate journals which, emerging from localised literary *milieux*, contributed to nurturing literary talents, to shaping the debate on disinterestedness and the autonomy of the arts from the field of power, and – with various degrees of success – to engaging with foreign literatures and transnational exchanges of ideas.

Taken as a whole, the articles here collected explicitly engage with the journal's action in local, national, and international cultural networks, from *Solaria*'s inception in 1926 to the demise of *Botteghe Oscure* in 1960. In this sense, the chronological spectrum of this guest-edited issue ensures that, for instance, we can identify the main phases of the development of a disinterested, and seemingly apolitical, approach to the role of the arts, cutting across *Solaria*, *Letteratura*, and *Botteghe Oscure*, linking together Florence, Rome and the various foreign republics of letters with which these journals dialogued over the years. However, a rigorous discussion of the factors that contributed to the emergence and consolidation of the discourse of disinterestedness during the Fascist regime and in the early Republican years must take into account the rise of competing narratives and intellectual forces that voiced an increasing discomfort with this posture and, therefore, elaborated an alternative ideologically inflected model of cultural intervention.

The Florentine literary field in the years under scrutiny is a test case for the interaction of evolving, competing paradigms. Given its exemplarity, several of the contributions in this volume refer to literary experiences which originated in Florence, and from this city made substantial contributions to the national literary discourse. The contributions gathered in this special issue do not claim to offer a comprehensive account of periodical culture in Italy but present a number of case studies to illustrate how networks, institutions, and individuals

interact behind the journal's printed page and how these interactions shape the journal's message.

An illustration of this dynamic is furnished by the reconstruction of the network interactions supporting and shaping the cultural action of the journals launched by Carlo Carocci in Fascist Florence, *Solaria* (1926-1936) and *La riforma letteraria* (1936-1939), in Daniela La Penna's article. Focusing on how network diversification strategies put in place by journal editors affect the journal's performance in the field, La Penna's inquiry evaluates the impact that overlapping political and cultural networks have on the sustainability of *Solaria* and *La riforma letteraria*. The study advances a detailed empirical map of the crossflows between overlapping networks supporting Carocci's outlets and other Florence-based journals, with a varied degree of alignment to Fascist discourse. La Penna sheds light on how Carocci's progressive enstrangement from a regime-sanctioned cultural politics of disinterestedness and gradual engagement with anti-Fascist circles affected the performance of his journals in the field.

Similarly focusing on a journal emerging from the rich and interconnected literary ecosystem in Florence, Francesca Billiani traces the development of *Letteratura* (1937-1947), founded and edited by the writer and intellectual Alessandro Bonsanti. Billiani argues that a distinctly apolitical journal such as *Letteratura* adopted an attitude of 'engaged indifference' to promote cultural debates, innovative critical methodologies and international literary exchanges against the more pressing constraints imposed by the Fascist regime in its final incantation. By analyzing the journal's internal composition and its key debates, the article demonstrates how Italian intellectuals, critics and writers, resorted to a model of 'engaged indifference' to produce intellectual discourses, aspiring to move beyond the boundaries of Fascist culture. Raffaele Donnarumma's essay zooms on Bonsanti's *Letteratura* to investigate Carlo Emilio Gadda's collaboration with the journal. The analysis of Gadda's collaboration

contributes not only to mapping the writer's positionings in 1940s Italy but also to interpreting his political transition from the regime to the republic. By focusing specifically on Gadda's 1940s writings in *Letteratura* as well as in the Liberal-oriented *Il Mondo*, founded by Bonsanti in 1945, Donnarumma shows how Gadda used both journals as strategic platforms implicitly to redeem his previous support for Fascism and to legitimate his modernist posture against post-war neo-realistic trends.

Rome, the seat of political power, is represented here by two journals, *Botteghe Oscure* and *Il Contemporaneo*; these aimed not only to link contemporary Italian literature to the domestic cultural and literary trends but also to take part in exchanges beyond national borders. Marguerite Caetani's *Botteghe Oscure* (1948-1960) – a journal with international ambitions and promoting a transnational interpretation of modernism, and Carlo Salinari's *Il Contemporaneo* (1954-1955) – a periodical closely aligned with the philo-Soviet cultural politics of the Communist Party – interpret two closely intertwined but ideologically opposed positions of the cultural diplomacy underpinning the Cold War.

By looking at the internal composition of *Botteghe Oscure* and the editors' and contributors' correspondence, Massimiliano Tortora's article puts forward the hypothesis that Caetani's journal was not a disengaged outlet, as often stated. In Tortora's view, *Botteghe Oscure* takes the shape of a platform from where the liberal, cosmopolitan, and moderately left-wing intelligentsia could voice their cultural concerns and give shape to their intellectual mission. Tortora claims, therefore, that *Botteghe Oscure*'s apparently disinterested stance appears so only if compared to contemporary journals which embraced a more resolutely militant position in the field.

One such journal was Salinari's *Il Contemporaneo*, to which Mila Milani's study is dedicated. Milani explores the interweaving of national and transnational dynamics in Communist-affiliated journals during the Cold War, and precisely in the years preceding the

1956 Hungarian crisis. By analysing Carlo Salinari's editorial strategies, Milani argues that, despite Communist cultural policies generally upholding a national-popular stance, *Il Contemporaneo* intended to develop transnational exchanges. These were strategic actions meant to legitimize the journal's position within the cultural debates of mid-1950s Italy. Through a discussion of editorial notes, foreign contributions and reviews of foreign literature, Milani sheds light on these intentions, also unveiling Salinari's difficulties in synthesizing domestic intervention with transnational engagement and in adjusting to the demands of the Communist Party.

In the post-war period, however, while engagement with foreign cultures became a more evident fixture of the periodical press as *Letteratura*'s second series, *Botteghe Oscure* and *Il Contemporaneo* testify, domestic concerns continued to drive the conversation. The issue concludes with Stefano Giovannuzzi's analysis of Vittorio Bodini's *L'esperienza poetica*. Vittorio Bodini's *Esperienze poetiche* (1954-1956) is a journal located in South and therefore off the main geographical corridors linking Rome, Florence and the literary capitals in the North (Turin and Milan). Giovannuzzi's detailed examination shows that despite the peripheral location, Bodini was able to foreground an original critical discourse, which anticipates, in tone and content, several interventions launched by *Officina* (1955-1959). Bodini's adversarial interventions took the shape of sharp evaluations of the poetic outputs and critical schools linked to these dominant languages, as well as an active patronization of new poets who – in his view – contributed an original accent to the national poetic language. Therefore, Giovannuzzi's article elucidates both the enduring relevance of national debates and the role played by the periphery in the reception and critique of dominant trends, such as hermetism and neo-realism.

The articles gathered in this special issue share the concern that, in the years between the fall of the regime and the establishment of the republic, periodical culture in Italy was

foundational to the construction of a national culture. Thanks to a rigorous examination of key journals' published face, underpinning networks, and 'backroom' issues, periodicals emerge as significant test cases for evaluating the detailed and practical working mechanisms of cultural media and for assessing their role in shaping domestic intellectual concerns and international dialogues.